

# THE IMPACT OF THE SACRED ON THE POETRY OF JUAN EDUARDO CIRLOT

**Guillermo Aguirre Martínez**

*Universidad Complutense de Madrid*

guillermo-aguirre@hotmail.com

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Poet, essayist, as well as an outstanding figure in many other disciplines related to art, Juan Eduardo Cirlot (1966-1973) stands as one of the most brilliant Spanish poets of the second half of the 20th century, and at the same time, one of the most unknown of our literature. The purpose of these pages is to contribute to the recovery of this figure, taking into account the creative inquiries that lead to the immense collection of poems *Bronwyn*, his late, total work, unfinished and unfinishable, as long as in his spirit, life and creation conformed a single unit in constant growth, of an unusual depth.

The different levels in Cirlot's poetry allow us to recall, in order to study his imaginary universe, Paul Ricoeur's scheme (2004), which consists of discovering three symbolic orders in the images, according to the degree of their reach; that is, a poetic one, that can be identified with creation within its phenomenal coordinates, an oneiric one, concomitant with the individual experience of the author, and finally, a cosmic order, capable to establish universal relations of analogy, a web of cosmic structure that can be identified with the analogical understanding mentioned by Dante in his *Convivio* (Dante, 2005: 205). On the other hand, given the organic character of his work, it will be interesting to make an approach from the creative germ of his compositions, the root idea, in Georges Poulet terms (1997), which, as it gains mixture and depth, experiments a symbolic metamorphosis very attractive to the application of Bachelard's theories (2003, 2006), configuring a perfectly coherent and interrelated poetic universe, that undoubtedly tends to a final object of a clearly mystical and spiritual root.

First of all, we would like to give a brief outline of the poet's life, with the purpose of contextualising the creative framework of his work. Juan Eduardo Cirlot was born in Barcelona in 1916, and his childhood coincides with the rise of the isms of the first quarter of the century. After a few approaches to music, which gave him the opportunity of familiarising with the dodecaphonic method developed by Schönberg, of great importance in his last poetic phase, he focused on writing, entering, in the forties, the Catalan avant-garde group *Dau al set* (the seventh side of the dice), where he would get in touch with the creative proposals shared by some of the members of the circle, such as Joan Bossa or Antoni Tàpies. As regards his interest on musical serialism and atonality, the author himself wrote in his *Diccionario de los ismos* that "la palabra 'atonal' ya indica la vocación de abismo, de obscuridad, de 'noche del alma'" (Cirlot, 1949: 39), that will be recurrent expressions in the whole of his poetry. Parallel to these approaches and his work in the publishing house Gustavo Gili, Cirlot continued studying modern art and his idealized medieval age, by studying in depth the Hebrew cabala, with the combinatory method developed by Abraham Abulafia de Zaragoza, a Spanish mystic from the 13th century, or the theories of the medieval philosopher Ramón

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Llull, mystic not only because of his searches but also because, as we also see in Cirlot, in his cosmos “se relacionan [...] la realidad, el mundo, el espíritu, el tiempo y el éxtasis” (Cirlot, 1949: 227).

By mid-century, Cirlot had the opportunity to know the eminent German mythologist Marius Schneider, who, in his work *El origen musical de los animales-símbolos en la mitología y la escultura antiguas*, investigated certain elementary rhythmical relationships that existed in the origin and development of every work of art. Schneider’s six-year stay in Barcelona gave Cirlot the opportunity to know in depth and in detail some aspects that he was interested in, being these findings previous to those incursions that would later drive him to the creation of *Bronwyn*, the birth of which we will comment on below.

In 1966, Juan Eduardo Cirlot went to the cinema to watch Franklin Schaffner’s film *The War Lord*, starred by Charlton Heston and Rosemary Forsyth. The latter played the role of Bronwyn, a Celtic maiden of unknown origins who, in a certain scene, emerges from the water as an epiphany or a divine revelation. The impact that scene had in the poet, motivated by its symbolic meaning, was crushing from the beginning, but it increased to delirium when, a few months later, he went to the cinema again, this time to watch *Hamlet*, by the Russian director Kozintsev, and he immediately established a singular identification of the character of Ophelia and Bronwyn. The miracle was made: both constituted a same aspect of divinity. The assimilation between both of them was even more amazing as, for Cirlot, they constituted the pantheon of divinities associated to the power of generation and the power of annihilation of creation. Bronwyn and Ophelia embodied, all in all, the feminine side of divinity, coincident, in Jung’s words, with the *anima*, “la mujer desconocida” (Jung, 2005: 71), the spirit of creation that must be searched for by the rational I, by Hamlet, by the knight that wins the maiden’s heart, and ultimately, by Cirlot himself.

According to the poet, the promise of reaching a complete knowledge of oneself made by the creative soul, by Bronwyn, implies the need of destroying those who immerse themselves in those searches. In assimilation, we can say that the appearance of the poem entails the eradication of the author, of his conscious and rational nature, at least during the act of creation. This way, in the occasions where the work is extended to a lifetime, the knowledge means the annihilation of the subject. Both Bronwyn and Ophelia force the destruction of those who enter her centre, her generational core, or his own consummation, once the knight, Hamlet, gives up his destiny by finding a more attractive one. Therefore, as the “aspecto femenino del ser supremo” (Cirlot, 2007: 410), they both symbolize its generator and shapeless side, as in already established models such as the Persian Daena, the Babylonian Lilith, or the Hebrew Shekina who, as

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Gershom Scholem states, according to Cirlot, “puede tener aspectos negativos, ocultos, destructores” (Cirlot, 2007: 410), despite playing a fundamentally positive role in the process of creation. This other variant, that of the eternal feminine giver of light and knowledge exclusively, can be found on Dante’s Beatrice or Goethe’s Faust, although in this latter case Margarete will be the sacrificed figure. The dilogy is clearly summarized by Cirlot himself, when he states that

como imagen arquetípica, la mujer es compleja y puede ser sobredeterminada de modo decisivo; en sus aspectos superiores, como Sofía y María, como personificación de la ciencia o de la suprema virtud; como imagen del ánima es superior al hombre mismo por ser el reflejo de la parte superior y más pura de éste. En sus aspectos inferiores, la mujer no está al nivel del hombre, sino por debajo de él. Es acaso cuando se realiza a sí misma, como *Ewig Weibliche*, tentadora que arrastra hacia abajo (Cirlot, 2007: 320).

The orphic descent to hell, to the lands where poetry emerges and the creator dies, the land of mothers visited by Faust at a time, is to be the ultimate aim of our poet, as his aesthetic search is strongly linked to an heterodox religiosity directed to know and inhabit the core of its creative spirit. Therefore, Bronwyn converges with Jung’s anima, the Christian soul, the inner god of the Rhenish mystic or the unconscious, irrational and Dionysian nature of creation.

El descenso a una era prehistórica pertenece desde el testimonio de Homero a la *nekyia*. [...] La *nekyia* no es una caída inútil, meramente destructiva, titánica, sino una oportuna *katabasis eis antron*, un descenso al infierno de la iniciación y del conocimiento secreto (Jung, 2002: 129).

Reaching this luminous depth will mean, as we have said, the denial of the I, which is needed for the rising, in the place saturated by consciousness and reason now abandoned, of Bronwyn, embodying beauty and destruction.

As regards this inner search, we cannot forget that the poet wanted to be remembered as the last Castilian mystic, understanding mysticism not in the orthodox way, but rather iconoclastic, a tendency to a higher knowledge, supraindividual and unlimited. Cirlot considers himself first a “nihilista y secundariamente idealista” (Cirlot, 2001: 275). Creation, love and knowledge did not entail for him a promise of God, but a denial of himself and the own identity: “dentro del corazón está la muerte/ como una runa blanca de ceniza” (Cirlot, 2001: 61). At this point we clearly find aspects defended by the existentialism of the moment and other philosophies. Sailing through his poetry we will find a lot of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, a lot of Wagner too, and, finally, a great abundance taken from the spiritual heterodoxy of our culture, beginning with the Spanish mysticism, going on to the

Rhenish, and further on, picking motives of a Persian, Taoist or Hindu Vedic origin. The Medieval worldview will be, in spite of everything, the one that will more wisely determine the ultimate background of his verses, being the no world, paraphrasing Cirlot's well known expression, what constitutes the reason of his particular search.

Acceding to *Bronwyn*, going into the pure I, where even the I stops being I as identity disappears, closing the senses and listening to the voice of the spirit and the buried whisper of poetry will be the ultimate sense of his search from now on. Marius Schneider, regarding the point where formal aesthetics ends and an inner and incontinent starts, states that

se alcanza el punto culminante cuando una persona oye su melodía propia, es decir, la melodía de su propia alma, pero no cantada por ella misma, sino emitida por algo o alguien [...] a quien pertenece esa melodía. Nadie puede escapar al dictado imperioso de esta voz. Cuando un ser vivo se encuentra frente a aquel llamamiento de su propia alma exteriorizada, la atracción es fatal. Es la hora de la muerte (Schneider, 2001: 24).

But listening to the inner voice will not always be possible; first, it will be necessary to make a *tabula rasa*, an aggression or an act of violence against the usual sense of words, of aesthetics maintained to that moment. Only where an accurate meaning, a logical and organized content is not noticed, there will be space for a suprarational understanding of the language. It will be necessary to destroy the linear sequence of words to get to an analogical and intuitive intellection. Schneider points out that “en el lenguaje místico el son (el plano acústico) de una palabra importa más que su significado semántico, cuya precisión responde a un plano paralelo, pero inferior al puramente musical” (Schneider, 2001: 153). Through this rhythm, one goes into a field distant from the usual understanding of language, not using it according to conventional logics, but through the deliberate combination of some letters with others based on numerical reasons and rhythmical or phonic reasons, converging in many ways with the methods of atonal dodecaphonic music.

As we said, the word does not provide knowledge, at least not its perceptible expression. Whatever real and eternal that resides in language is not presented in an evident way, but it is hidden behind its shape. The expression, for this reason, will only be the visible part of an eternal invisible truth; according to Tàpies' words, whose thought coincides in many aspects with Cirlot's,

El arte, por excelente que sea, será siempre una manifestación más de la *maya*, del engaño que son todas las cosas. Y la verdad que buscamos no la hallaremos nunca en un cuadro, sino que aparecerá tan sólo

después de la última puerta que sepa franquear el contemplador con su propio esfuerzo (Tàpies, 2008: 64).

The word will therefore have a runic value, of a language to decipher, as it hides a concealed meaning that does not match its expression. It will be necessary to get into the particular universe of the poet to get to the ultimate meaning of his hieroglyphic poetry, dissociated from all communicative use of expression. Each particular spiritual experience is, of course, exclusive and particular. Likewise, each grade of experience is corresponded by a different language, constituted in the case of Cirlot both by first approaches intelligible to the poetry reader, and by the most radical expressive searches made in the course of this huge work which is *Bronwyn*, a collection of poems constituted by sixteen collections of poems, all of them oriented to listening to the voice of the maiden, to situate themselves in the sacred place where creation arises.

The passage from a language subject to an organized sequence of elements to another controlled by non-phenomenal, but symbolical laws, can be related to the Hegelian jump from quantitative into qualitative, this overcoming implying entering into limits where the canonical sense loses its strength and a truth emerges that competes to higher regimes of knowledge, a harmonic space where the different worldviews of the human being light out to enlighten a common yet particular truth, transcendent although immanent to every individual experience. This way, searches based on a catholic, cabalist, taoist, nihilist, or other spirit, all of them perceptible in Cirlot's poetry, converge, exceeding the limit between orthodoxy and heterodoxy in an emptiness, in the first place, and then in a vital analogical order.

The poetic attraction suffered by Juan Eduardo Cirlot, the driving idea that captivates and gives strength to his creation, coincides, as we have seen, with all that *Bronwyn* represents, “punto de partida [...] punto de vista central, principio de construcción: bisagra en torno a la que pivotará todo” (Poulet, 1997: 72). *Bronwyn* will be a personification of the generational soul, a magnet placed in deep waters, an element that offers, according to Bachelard “una invitación a morir: [...] una invitación a una muerte especial que nos permite alcanzar uno de los refugios materiales elementales” (Bachelard, 2003: 90). To get to her, we will have to melt into her substance, deprive our phenomenal world of order and consistency, be placed in the gravitational field of the unstable and, from there, rise our voice. The centre, the adequate perspective and the truth disappear, the transformation of some elements into others, always guided by relations created in the deep well of the spirit, a space restricted and unsuitable for a superficial reading or understanding of a work in which, absorbed, we contemplate the progressive excarnation of the poetic voice, willing itself to become all emptiness:

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Todo lo que me empuja por la noche  
por debajo del mar de la amargura  
buscando entre lamentos las raíces  
del ser y del no ser te pertenece  
(Cirlot, 2001: 444).

However, this painful path cannot be driven exclusively by a procedure doomed to the effacement of the rational I: the poet wants to be conscious of his lack of being, he wants to be present when the appearance of Bronwyn takes place; for this reason, he will begin to apply the rationality of his combinatory-permutative method to his literary work, so that, the moment his vision melts with her darkness, some consciousness still remains, a lucid being present facing what happens, still an element of tension between both poles that, nonetheless, is going to be what prevents the fulfilment of the search undertaken by the creator.

With the beginning of his incursion into the *Bronwyn* cycle, around 1966, the mystical curve traced by the author will be reinforced by the accuracy of the cabalistic methodology and the dodecaphonic system that he will start to use systematically in many of his poems. The intuition and the logics will combine their proposals facing the pursuit of the mystic nothing, of the Celtic maiden, who eludes the mediation of an orthodox and risk-free knowledge and prefers, on the other side, all violence against language and reason. This way, a series of relations immanent to language and alien to the usual formal and intellectual convention will begin to arise as a new system of creation: it is a method aimed at fighting “contra el yerto alfabeto que recita tu nombre/ Bronwyn” (Cirlot, 2001: 128) by “remover el lenguaje para sacarlo de su insuficiencia” (Parra, 2000: 8). In these moments of creative delirium, we will witness a disorder, an alteration of conventional language that will drive the poet to a free use and disposition of letters, to the creation of a particular code by which he aims to communicate with his soul. Victoria Cirlot mentions:

Combinación y permutación constituyen técnicas similares, aunque la primera es más libre que la segunda “donde todos los versos y palabras se repiten variando perpetuamente de lugar”, sometiendo así todo el poema al «modelo». Las combinaciones toman el modelo fuera del texto mismo (el modelo es otro autor), en este caso Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer, al modo en que “Stravinsky hiciera con Pergolesi” en el ámbito de la música, o lo que Max Ernst hizo con los grabados del siglo pasado para alcanzar sus collages, en el ámbito de la plástica (Cirlot, 1997: 70-71).

In this moment Juan Eduardo Cirlot will avoid common and conventional rules of expression, linking consonants and vowels according to an internal rhythm, a chromatism, the ultimate sense of which must be found in the shape of its internal dynamics.

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They used to say in Barcelona that Juan Eduardo Cirlot would be a great poet if the language that he spoke were known. The hermeticism that is characteristic of the poet does not appear in his poetical start, but in the poetry collections of the cycle *Bronwyn*, where we would become observers of an unreal world inhabited by verses that could be ridiculous out of the context where they arose, verses like “Yrwy nyrwy/ Yrwyn/ Wrbwn/ Yrwyr nyrwy” (Cirlot, 2001: 282), that we should not just reject, but take as broken shapes of a search that goes far beyond the limits of stanzas or even a whole poetry collection. Cirlot’s search is as deep as wide as regards means and systems of poetic inquiry. Despite this, and despite his tireless effort to melt his voice with that of the maiden that sings, communication will not take place in a satisfactory way, as the dialog between the individual and the generational soul would not occur fluently, and the poet and his inner voice will speak out alternately without converging in an absolute unit, hypothetical achievement that would only take place in the silence of the soul many times stated by mystic. For Cirlot, there is no way to get inside the being without being therefore disintegrated: “Bronwyn, yo sólo quiero comprenderte/ y nunca las palabras me podrán/ dar nada” (Cirlot, 2001: 347).

The whole process we are facing offers a universe full of images that, taken to its extreme tension and its solitary need, are undone by alternating upward and downward, formative and destructive tendencies, always elusive and dynamic, pursuing its ultimate aspiration, that may enable the illumination of Bronwyn, which constitutes herself into an image alien to all intellectual diction and expression, only accessible by the contemplation and eradication of all symbol that intercedes between her and the analytical mind of the poet; “Bronwyn,/ sé que me estás oyendo desde un ámbito/ que sesga dimensiones” (Cirlot, 2001: 223), we read in one of the poems, as a verification of the impossibility of reaching to name the pure idea, the extreme vertex of a pyramid, the summit of which converges with an exterior plane alien to our intellection.

The symbol, mediator between the poet and the idea, is necessary to access to a higher order of knowledge, as its destruction will be necessary in a later period, once the progressive effort to give it content saturates, preventing an advance towards the myth, towards the sun of the spirit that nourishes and at the same time feeds from the constant flow and reflow of the symbolic radiation. According to Gilbert Durand,

Para la Gnosis propiamente dicha los “ángeles supremos” son Sofía, Barbelo, Nuestra Señora del Santo Espíritu, Helena, etc., cuya caída y salvación representan las mismas esperanzas de la vía simbólica: la conducción de lo concreto a su sentido iluminante. Es que la Mujer, como

los Ángeles de la teofanía plotiniana, posee, al contrario del hombre, una doble naturaleza que es propia del symbolon mismo: es creadora de un sentido y al mismo tiempo su receptáculo concreto. La femineidad es la única mediadora, por ser a la vez “pasiva” y “activa” (Durand, 2007: 41-42).

The word will of course also become a symbol; it will be dispossessed of its dry sterility in the moment it illuminates realities of a bigger amplitude than those exclusively valid for the daily speech, i.e., when its power overcomes the rational siege that surrounds it and advances to a non suspected plane of relationships according to its legitimate function. For this reason, Cirlot will not just search for a natural sense, an understandable degree of approach to his work, but the symbolic use of expression will be enough for him, taking only the sign from it, once the system of particular relationships replaces that of common relationships, not valid for the personal search. According to Amador Vega, “Cirlot ha construido su ‘alfabeto religioso’ para poder convocar al mundo y todos los orbes, para descomponerlo como en los rituales sacrificiales y restar después junto a la luz que ha creado” (Vega, 2000: 7). Language, receptive qualities awaken, will not have an exclusively unidirectional or designative sense, but it will manifest itself as a recipient space and as matter capable of containing the designated object within the limits of its outlines without practising any violence against itself. Bronwyn, as a particular myth of Cirlot, will inhabit in him, in his creative and destructive world, in his words, in his actions. The creator will get into this remote universe in the moment when the distance that separates his experiences from his desires merges through the poetic speech or through a state of sameness —absolute identification between its reason and its intuitive imagination— which, as Luigi Pareyson states, “no tiene nada de pasividad e inercia, sino que más bien representa el culmen de una actividad interna y laboriosa” (Pareyson, 1988: 23).

But it will not always be like this, the devastating lyric voice announces the impossibility of constantly living in the myth and penetrate into limits that are not adjacent to reality, alien to life and its regular and monotonous development:

Tu espíritu visible que me mira,  
tu lejanía absorta que me toca.  
Bronwyn, tu desunión que me deshace  
y me vierte en un lago de luz verde  
(Cirlot, 2001: 342).

Approaching those dark lands would entail getting into the domains of death; Cirlot gets into them, once the string that links one reality with the other is broken, deeper and denser, unreal insofar as it is disengaged from all contact with the everyday world. “La escritura no es un reflejo de algo que ocurre, sino experiencia ella misma

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de la metamorfosis, espacio en el que la búsqueda se vuelve real. Experiencia cerrada en sí, contiene las respuestas a la fragmentada e inconclusa identidad del yo” (Casado, 2000: 20). Once the attraction in its Dionysian aspect is accepted, the poet will develop inside the poem, without achieving his fulfilment outside. This way, a first destructive impulse will not be followed by an Apollonian reply; instead, facing the need to replace his identity with that of his most primary creative instinct, Cirlot will go deeper into the waters that will drive him to destruction. The replacement, however, takes place. Bronwyn will not be alien to the poet, out of his world’s orbit anymore, she will become a part of his most intimate inner world, the powerful magnet that composes and destroys all that goes into its gravitational field. Bronwyn will be the necessary filter that all dogmas, each solidified reality of the poet, must go through, to identify its creative spirit with a primary rhythm that lacks judgements and reified ideas. Rather than a place to get to, Bronwyn will become a crossing place for all experience: source of ablation and, at the same time, of estrangement and breach between a common condition of matter and a condition that is heterodox and, therefore, lacking sense beyond that given by the poet. Sometimes, none at all:

Pero sé que tú misma has de sufrir  
la destrucción constante de que todo  
alimenta su hoguera inconcebible  
decretada por algo que no existe  
(Cirlot, 2001: 450).

And other times that of its redemption, the salvation of the soul he seeks:

He vuelto a ser la luz donde la luz  
deja de ser la luz para ser luz,  
en el centro del centro de los centros,  
en la rosa de rosa de las rosas  
(Cirlot, 2001: 518).

Borrowing Poulet’s words we can point out that “el ser acepta ser sólo el lugar de paso de sus pensamientos” (Poulet, 1997: 69), considering inherently of his own not just its being but what impels it to search and know. There is no sign, positive or negative, that distinguishes Bronwyn, who stays neutral, expressing, nonetheless, and maybe for that reason, a capacity of attraction typical of every completely alive substance, elusive to any reclusion of her powers and, therefore, able to designate with her mere name any element, any state of being that could stay neutral before bursting in a defined meaning, combining in her invocation reality and idea, the world controlled by logics and the cosmic world. This way, Bronwyn is creative form because without communicating, she instantly evokes unsuspected analogies between the elements of the world we live in:

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Lo que llamo Brabante es un instante  
sin tiempo y sin espacio.  
Igual que tu belleza es una sola  
conjunción instantánea de poderes  
secretos  
(Cirlot, 2001: 322).

The identification does not happen in the space or in the time limits, but outside both, in an instant of total union between poet, symbol and desired object.

Living in the flame, as Cirlot did, is more typical of gods than of men. Diving into a world of creation and destruction, subject to the full powers of matter and thinking, is extremely painful and unbearable unless the symbolic element is the sacrificed fuel; but that is not the case. Unlike Hamlet, Cirlot preferred to offer himself in sacrifice, approach, as Empedocles, the interior of Etna and that way, let Bronwyn live eternally, she, with her infinite forms, with the same face, completely unaltered but constantly moving: “lo autoocultante de la tierra no es un estado uniforme, ni rígido, sino que se desarrolla en inagotable plenitud de modos y formas sencillas” (Heidegger, 2006: 69). It is worth to remember Bachelard’s statements regarding the abysses, given that “el calor es el signo de una profundidad, el sentido de una profundidad” (Bachelard, 2006: 68). Of course, the myth of Cirlot does not only have a spiritual nature, but also a carnal one, as his entire universe, ready to dissolve and devour itself, as

el pensamiento religioso busca siempre nuevas imágenes para el yo, para el sujeto considerado como lo intangible e incomprensible, y también se ve cómo al final sólo puede determinar este yo desechando nuevamente todas esas insuficientes e inadecuadas imágenes plásticas (Cassirer, 2003: 218).

This way, the poet had to put all the substance of his creation on fire and that way, shelter, refresh and enlighten, more and more, the object of his poetry. He did so until he could not go on, until he himself had to go into the fire and, this time, disappear perpetuating with his escape the figure of a Bronwyn completely provided with being now:

Pero vives en mí más que yo mismo,  
que apenas soy la sombra de mi ser  
que va perdiendo trozos del espíritu  
en los negros ramajes de los años  
(Cirlot, 2001: 462).

These are the last verses of a Cirlot that cared more about his non-being and the creative spirit than his consummated creation, his I.

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